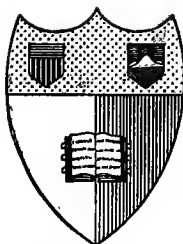


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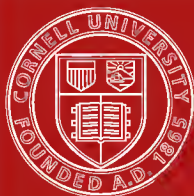
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IRVING
AS HAMLET.

BY
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"NOW I AM ALONE."—Act II., Scene 2.

HENRY S. KING & Co.,
65 CORNHILL, & 12 PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON.
1875. A.R.V.

IRVING AS HAMLET.

AMONG the commonest examples of that cant of criticism which Sterne found so offensive, is the assertion that Shakspeare is for the closet rather than the stage. If a dramatic reporter has no other exordium ready, he always begins with that. If, incapable of giving an idea of the performance he should describe, he desires to convey to his readers an impression of himself as a "superior person," he adheres throughout his article to the notion that Shakspeare is unactable, or at least is better understood when only read, and probably imposes upon many. For a lazy age, going to the theatre is too tiresome; for a gaudy and frivolous generation anything better than opera bouffe is too slow. It is an easy escape to say that there is no acting now-a-days, and that if there were it would be wasted on a dramatist too grand to be acted. But this is never said or believed by those who have studied Shakspeare both in the library and in the theatre. And least of all can it be said or believed of "Hamlet."

Mystery is, no doubt, one of "Hamlet's" greatest charms, but the play has a mystery as potent for the vulgar as that which fascinates the educated and thinking. Moreover, its mystery is never suffered to be dull or to override the dramatic interest. And while by its supernatural element it awes all who contemplate the passage of its incidents, by its homely and simple human nature it stimulates the mind to pierce whatever in it is hard of comprehension. Here, if anywhere, is a great stage play, in which the emotions and bewilderments of gentle and simple may sympathetically commingle. Even the excisions of the common acting versions, though some of the passages are material and others suppress certain subtle but important points, have probably tended to define, and to truly define, the conception which here and there the poet too exuberantly and ramblingly pursued. And if that conception owes something to the pruning of the stage manager, how much does it owe to the study and enthusiasm of great actors! Actual performance is magically enlightening, and the recent success of Henry Irving shows that original reflection is still marvellously fruitful. One may be able to quote Goethe and Hazlitt—one may have little pet theories of Hamlet comfortably settled and docketed in one's mind; but after all, the true interpreter is the actor in whom we see Hamlet live.

Nor is it necessary that he should live before us with faultless graces of aspect or of elocution. A writer, who like many others mistakes cynicism for

criticism, has said with a sneer, that if previous Hamlets were inferior in some parts to Irving, perhaps a beautiful voice and a graceful person went far to reconcile the public to their deficiencies. Probably so. Perhaps in the days when the Kembles and others held their own almost as much by physique as by intellect, very magnificent Hamlets were seen with whom no one could associate the idea of deficiency at all, although a too ornate conventionalism prevented their piercing, as later actors have done, towards the heart of Hamlet's mystery. But, after all, it is no new thing for actors of the magnificent order to be pushed aside by others of a more nervous and sensitive temperament. Garrick was neither tall, nor grand, nor a declaimer, but he distanced, and justly distanced, his contemporaries. Edmund Kean was small and mean in aspect, and violated the canons of elocution received in his time, but he shook the dynasty of the Kembles, and the great John Phillip himself silenced the sycophant sneerers around him by generously admitting that the little man roared in the right place.

It is indeed argued that Ophelia's description of Hamlet implies his possession of a very ingratiating exterior and very courtly qualities. But since when have the ecstatic epithets of a young lady in love been recognised as literally descriptive? And why are we to suppose that Hamlet was so much nobler to look at than other princes, because like almost all princes he was esteemed the "glass of fashion and the

mould of form"? Besides, much to her honour, the greater part of Ophelia's commendation refers to gifts of mind and manner, which are entirely independent of figure, of physical deportment, and of vocal and articulatory perfection. While believing that Hamlet may be successfully played with almost any physique which is not obnoxiously unromantic, we avow the opinion that such a physique as Irving's—nervous, excitable, and pliant, suggestive of much thought and dreamy intellect, yet agile and natural and individual in its movements—comes nearer the normal English preconception of such a character than one more characterised by physical beauty and gesticulatory and elocutionary grace. In moments of high excitement Irving rapidly plods across and across the stage with a gait peculiar to him—a walk somewhat resembling that of a fretful man trying to get very quickly over a ploughed field. In certain passages his voice has a querulous, piping impatience which cannot be reconciled with stage elegance. But there is no reason why Hamlet should not have had these peculiarities; and if we are to see him really living in the midst of what has come upon him, the genius of the actor who accomplishes this all-important feat as only genius can, will be distinctly helped by any little ineffaceable peculiarities which, while not inconsistent with the character, give the representation of it a stamp of personal individuality. This, though a minor characteristic, has greatly distinguished Irving's acting in all his

noted parts, although the merit has not been much recognised in the surface criticism of the day. In each case—in Digby Grant, Mathias, Eugene Aram, Philip, even in the necessarily stilted King Charles, and, in spite of too young-looking a countenance, most pre-eminently in Richelieu—play-goers have felt that they have come to know a new and distinct and actual person, just as really and with just as true a sensation of novelty and kindled curiosity as when an interesting acquaintance is made at a dinner-table or in travelling. The secret lies in a bold combination of tragedy with character acting, which Irving has been the first to essay. He shows the nicest instinct in the degree to which he pushes it. Those who should expect his Hamlet to be as minutely individual as his Richelieu would show almost as much coarseness of perception as the queer critics who praised him for avoiding the temptation to make the death of Hamlet as horribly realistic as the death in the “Bells.” But even in his Hamlet there is a strongly marked and courageously preserved individuality, which is more helpful to the due effect of the play than any amount of insipid personal beauty and grace.

When plain incongruities have been avoided, and an impression of living personality instead of mere stage assumption has been created, there is little more that manner and idiosyncrasy can do to illuminate Hamlet. The rest must be acting—thought, conception, imagination, finding expression through the various channels of technical skill. And in this great

undertaking Irving has succeeded, mainly because of the simpleness and singleness of mind with which he has addressed to it his well-disciplined powers. The chief vice of Hamlets is deliberate point-making. Now an actor, calculating on making this or that point tell with an audience as it has never told before, or racking his brains to find new points with which to make new hits, is on the wrong tack. He may achieve a fine dramatic display, but it will not be Hamlet. Hamlet is nature ; nature, indeed, of a peculiar mould—nature refined by scholarship, by thought, and by princely polish—nature set on edge by the bitterness of a ghastly suspicion—nature disturbed by the supernatural—nature keenly and fretfully self-examining : but still nature. To play Hamlet conventionally, and to make it a succession of sure and resounding hits—as has often been done, and by no one more daringly and effectively than by Miss Marriott when she used to play the character, giving a sort of *pasticcio* of every Hamlet's best points—is really not to play Hamlet at all. You may behold the performance with pleasure because each episode stands out boldly and comes off well. But throughout it there is hardly a glimpse of the thoughtful but unaffected young prince of Shakspeare. The poet invites us to imagine him ere the action begins, living at ease in the court of an idolised father. He makes friends of all the courtiers, never losing his natural dignity, because he never thinks of it, but lets good-nature have play. He loves his studies much, his

thoughts more, and a beautiful and appreciating girl most of all. He watches with the unmixed enjoyment of a chaste and filial adolescence the conjugal happiness of his parents. Suddenly he is confronted with the death of his father under doubtful circumstances. He himself is displaced from the succession. His mother shamelessly marries an abhorred uncle, with whom he associates the whole avalanche of his troubles. And finally his father's spirit in arms incenses him with an unwelcome fire of revenge, and instigates him to a deed which is at once acceptable to his convictions of right and foreign to his temperament. Such a prince, so shocked and tried and tasked, is the character Hamlet ought to present to us.

Remembering past Hamlets—good and great as many have been—it seems to us that there remained yet one new though obvious conception to be realised. Every great actor has been anxious to show how he could play Hamlet; no one has quite succeeded in showing *how Hamlet would have played it*. And this is what Irving does. It is some years since Edwin Booth, who most nearly approached this natural and touching conception, was in England, and the impressions under which we name him are therefore not fresh. That he is the best or at least the truest Hamlet, except Irving, we have, however, no doubt. He is so unequal an actor that his other performances give no indication of the grace, the intellect, the poignant *nature* of his Hamlet; and the highest praise that can be accorded to Irving is

that to the princeliness, the ease, the gravity, the intellect, and the naturalness of Booth—all of which he possesses, though a little more deeply stamped with personal manner—he adds these two remarkably contrasted qualities: a sort of domestic sensibility of the calamities and perplexities by which Hamlet is inundated, and a wild poetry of aspect and of speech which till now—unless indeed by the old actors before our time—has not been even hinted except by painters. The root of it all, as we divine, is a simple, steady resolution on Irving's part to be what Hamlet must have been, and to let the rest take care of itself. If being Hamlet should lead to good points, they would be welcome, and the applause evoked by them would be as delicious to Irving as to another; but to make points by ceasing to be Hamlet was to him an impossible profanation. When certain critics tell him he still lacks the characteristics of the great French actors, they little appreciate his avoidance of all that is worst in French tragedy, and have failed to perceive how deeply he has drunk of the spring of all that is best in French comedy—finding in it a tragic inspiration which it might least have been expected to yield. An eminent comedian of the present day, being asked by a junior in his art how he should sit at a certain table in the course of a play, replied very wisely, “*Should* is not the word. It is not a question of how you *should* sit, but of how you *would* sit. If you sit as you would in real life, you cannot be far wrong.” Those who have seen Lafont and Regnier know that

this is the principle of the by-play in French comedy. It is also the secret of Irving's vivid success as Hamlet. Given natural acting, and the power to be natural in the more passionate and poetical as well as in the more level passages, and you cannot but have a Hamlet infinitely more affecting and impressive, in its general scope, than can be produced under the old system of objective dramatic effect.

Shakspeare ended most of his plays badly, and the well-contrived terminations now familiar on the stage are usually the result of managerial prunings, long sanctioned by the well-satisfied instincts of the public. But as collateral reading on the subject of the play, the excised passages are often very valuable. This is the case in "Hamlet." The last act of the dying prince is to obtain from Horatio a promise that he will publicly clear the wounded name which, "things standing thus," Hamlet would leave behind him. No sooner is he dead than Horatio fulfils his behest. "Give order," he says,

"that these bodies

High on a stage be placed to the view ;
And let me speak, to the yet unknowing world,
How these things came about: So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts ;
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters ;
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause ;
And in this upshot, purposes mistook,
Fallen on the inventors' heads: all this can I
Truly deliver."

His offer is accepted, and the curtain falls as the

bodies slain in that terrible last scene, are borne to the public place where Horatio is to speak. Surely this scene has been overlooked by painters. Hamlet's corpse borne by four captains like a soldier's to the stage, amid soldiers' music and the rites of war, followed by the other bodies on less honoured biers, while the brave young Wittenberg student, who alone knows the whole story, faces a vast mob surging with every sort of excitement, grave in the presence of so terrible a tragedy, eager before those to whom he burns to explain it; while, by a permissible license, the too well-avenged spirit of Hamlet's father might be imagined hovering near the spectacle: all this in good hands would make a great picture. And dramatically the essence of its interest pervades the play. It is amidst the strange occurrences Horatio recites that Hamlet's character as we see it is formed. The truest Hamlet, therefore, is he who most clearly realizes in the earliest scenes what the young prince was before the mystery, suspicion, and calamity began, and who most consistently sustains and exhibits the impressions which his unexampled sad experience brings upon him. There is something positively repulsive in the cool way in which even great critics have "reckoned up" Hamlet's character as a mere exhibition of indecision. Even Goethe's beautiful simile, of the growing oak in a costly vase, has a tone of half contempt, not quite consistent with a sufficient apprehension of the exceptional pressure of circumstances and of his own unmanageable reflections on

Hamlet's nature. A little common-sense is worth a good deal of subtlety here; and to appreciate what Hamlet goes through, without preconceptions—which is what we imagine Irving to have done—is the best way of raising to the highest point the human interest of the character. In reading much of the criticism on Hamlet, one feels that it is written in an artificial manner by persons who have never really conceived what has happened to the hero, and are not properly impressed with the difficulty of his extricating himself from the circumstances in which he is placed. It is positively laughable to hear Hamlet sneered at for infirmity of purpose by writers who probably never in their lives had a more serious question to settle than whether they should give up a house at the Midsummer or Christmas quarter. Nor is it much less ludicrous to read in an ambitious critique, that Irving as Hamlet shows an unmanly degree of dejection. As if having to kill your mother's second husband within a few months of your father's murder, upon the injunction of your father's ghost, were a quite ordinary piece of work by which no well-regulated mind would suffer itself to be disturbed !

The tone and spirit of the whole play, and of Irving's impersonation, and of the Lyceum representation, is at antipodes with such ideas. The mounting of the play has been studiously kept from being too splendid. It is regal, but eminently domestic. The scenes without, where the ghost is first encountered, are

as wild as the text suggests they should be, but the apartments of the palace all look habitable. They are not brand new. They are not mere audience chambers. They are usable and used. The *habitués* move about as if they were at home, and at night they light themselves about with torches. It is complained that Irving leaves one apartment torch in hand, and immediately enters his mother's chamber with a bedroom lamp. What more natural? The lamp is no doubt left without the chamber on a slab, to be lit at the torch which is carried through the dark stone passages, and put out by knocking it against the wall or on the foot when the lamp is taken in hand. Such details are not of the first consequence, but they are important when the chief actor has seized the idea that, to sustain the imagination in the direction Shakspeare indicates, an air of castle domesticity must be kept up, so that the conception of a house blighted by the occurrences set forth in the action, and finally enumerated in the speech of Horatio which we have quoted above, may be the background of all Hamlet's dramatic effects. Even the melodious but primitive harps which sound at the entrance of the King and Queen in their comparatively simple state, serve the general purpose which the new Hamlet has kept steadily in view.

That purpose has, however, been most brilliantly served by a new and clear reading of a hitherto obscure aspect of Hamlet's character.

Irving is no mature dreamer, long accustomed to

metaphysical problems, and fond of putting them into fine language. He is not a precocious and priggish young philosopher airing his cleverness. Nor is he a mere master of theatrical devices, flooding the stage with tears perhaps at the very moment when Hamlet complains that he cannot weep, or exemplifying that common form of strenuous but imperfect absorption in a character which practically amounts to making its different phases inconsistent with each other. He is what Hamlet was. His mind has been enlarged and refined by much vagrant contemplation, but has never lost its exquisite simplicity, its fresh susceptibility. He is extremely self-observant, not in vanity or complacency, but because self-study is to him a fascinating avenue through which to approach all other knowledge of life and character. And from this point Irving has advanced to a detail absolutely new, and positively regenerating to some passages, if not to the general scope of the play. He has noticed that Hamlet not merely is simple-minded, frankly susceptible, and naturally self-contemplative, but has a trick—not at all uncommon in persons whose most real life is an inner one—*of fostering and aggravating his own excitements*. This discovery of Irving is a stroke of high genius, and will identify his Hamlet as long as the memory of it endures. The idea will be handed down, and the mechanical execution of it will probably be imitated; but the vivid, flashing, half-foolish, half-inspired hysterical power of Irving in the passages where it is developed is a

triumph of idiosyncrasy, which, even with the help of the traditions he is founding, is not very likely to be achieved by any other actor. Critics who carry about their own standards as other artisans carry pocket foot-rules, may pronounce this feature of Irving's Hamlet unmanly ; but it is the business of a great actor to play Hamlet, not to improve him. If he was partly hysterical, and aggravated half-consciously his own excitements, the actor who plays him, and sees this, must not hide it ; and if he show it to us, we shall see in his performance the truth, and probably the beauty, of a phase of Shakspeare's creation which has hitherto been neglected.

To whom, then, is it that we are introduced when Hamlet enters in the second scene of the tragedy in the train of his uncle-father and aunt-mother ? It is to an ingenuous though highly cultivated young prince, overwhelmed by an unconquerable grief for the death of an idolised father, and with horror at the events which have succeeded it. Revenge has even in his uncertainty become a nascent instinct under the goadings of his misery. What follows is at once simple and terrible. To the vague promptings of grief and revenge are soon added the sublime force of ghostly injunctions. There is so little in all this that is mysterious, that we ought to be very grateful to an actor who brings it from the gloomy grandeur of a conventional atmosphere within the range of domestic feeling and strongly marked human character. Let us try and remember, as we are encouraged to do by

Shakspeare, and almost compelled to do by Irving, that the ghost is the only supernatural character in the play—that Hamlet is one of ourselves, though cleverer than we are, more eloquent, more imaginative, and—shall we say it to please the common-form critics?—less manly and decided. For factitious mystery, Irving substitutes natural susceptibilities, and makes his audience share them. Few of us have Hamlet's sensitive constitution. Still fewer have his strong provocations to crime. None of us are agitated by supernatural visitations. But we can all understand, as we watch Irving, how such a man as Hamlet would be affected by such influences. With Irving the tragedy is as little a show-piece as it would have been to a real Hamlet. It is life and death you are gazing at while he is on the stage. The royal house of Denmark has a black shadow over it, and a bright, fresh, young prince, "the rose and expectancy of the fair state," is doomed to peer amidst the gloom, now peopled with his own imaginings, and anon disturbed by a lurid and fitful supernatural light, for the truth of its origin, and the means of dissipating it by vengeance. Faithful in this pursuit, Irving defies alike the temptations of tradition and the allurements of a text which invites declamation. He will not be drawn out of the character. And the character lives in him as it probably never lived before.

Upon one point we differ from, or at least cannot wholly agree with, the first dramatic critic of the day, who, writing in the *Times*, has picked out, as the lead-

ing characteristic of Irving's Hamlet, a repugnance to cruelty. He says:—

If we rightly interpret Mr. Irving's performance, his reply to this question is to the effect that the nature of Hamlet is essentially tender, loving, and merciful. He is not a weak man called upon to do something beyond his powers, but he is a kindly man urged to do a deed, which, according to the *lex talionis*, may be righteous, but which is yet cruel. In Mr. Henry Taylor's *Philip van Artevelde*, one of the personages asks Philip, in order to ascertain his fitness to become a ruler in very stormy times, "Can you be cruel?" thereby implying that without something like an element of cruelty in his nature his appointed work cannot be effectually done. According to Mr. Irving—as we suppose—it is to the utter lack of cruelty in his nature that Hamlet's shortcomings are to be attributed. He is a judge to whom the black cap is so abhorrent that he can never persuade himself to put it on. Mercy will always usurp the seat of Justice when her usurpation is least desirable. He is capable of any amount of sorrow—sorrow for his dead father, sorrow for Ophelia. An undercurrent of tearfulness runs through all his discourse, but of unmitigated hate he is unsusceptible, if we answer in the negative Shylock's question, "Hates any man the thing he would not kill?"—more unsusceptible than he himself suspects. The hideous crime revealed by the ghost may cause him to "fall a-cursing like a drab," and bestow upon his uncle a large number of ugly adjectives; but for all that he does not like to kill him.

Now of the tenderness and lovingness of Hamlet's disposition we are as well persuaded as the writer of this passage. That Hamlet could not possibly have been cruel without just provocation is certain; and it is not less so that gratuitous cruelty is a quality impossible to be associated with the character as impersonated by Irving. But of any conscious revulsion

against cruel vengeance upon his uncle there is no sign in the play, and we observed none in the player. If it is to the "utter lack of cruelty in his nature" that Hamlet's shortcomings are to be attributed, "according to Irving," how shall we account for the restoration of the rarely played scene, in which Hamlet abstains from killing Claudius at his prayers, because that would send him straight to heaven, whereas his victim, Hamlet's father, was suddenly slain, with all his imperfections on his head? Only by a forced and untenable supposition that, in reciting the speech in a tone of vehement savagery, Irving means to convey the idea that Hamlet is playing a part to himself, and humouring his mercifulness behind a show of refined cruelty. "Why this is hire and salary," he exclaims,

"not revenge.

He took my father grossly, full of bread :
With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May ;
And how his audit stands, who knows save heaven ?
But, in our circumstance and course of thought,
'Tis heavy with him. And am I then revenged,
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and season'd for his passage ?
No !

Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent :
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed ;
At game, a-swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in't ;
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damned and black
As hell, whereto it goes."

The actor who can recite these lines with energy and passion, may yet have and be faithful to a tender conception of Hamlet's natural character, but he cannot possibly, it seems to us, with all deference, have intended to make a lack of cruelty in Hamlet, the "physic which prolongs" his uncle's "sickly days." Hamlet is hindered, first by a dread lest he is being seduced by diabolical influence, under the shape of his father, into an act of sanguinary injustice, and afterwards by a sort of moral paralysis, which strikes through his whole being when he realises, in the light of his own habitual contemplations, the solemnity and sublime responsibility of a fatal vengeance. But against the mere cruelty of anything he can do to his uncle, any revolting there may be in his nature is unconscious, and only makes a small part of the supreme tension and excitement into which he is thrown by the behest supernaturally conveyed to him. In the mere matter of cruelty, Hamlet is not in advance of his time, of the barbarity of whose spirit the play gives full evidence. The speech we have quoted is so brutal and "so cracks the wind" of a coarse conceit, that one is tempted to regard it as a dark blot upon the play. But there are other things in Shakspeare, and many passages in his contemporaries, quite as indecently remorseless; and whether we regard "Hamlet" as a picture of Shakspeare's age, or of its own mythical period, we shall find that none of its characters show any sign of recoiling from the cruelty, or questioning the rightness

of vengeance upon wicked offenders. A very important speech as bearing upon this point, and upon the roots of Hamlet's indecision, though otherwise much below the level of the play, is always omitted in representation. Hamlet, after killing Polonius, encounters a Norwegian army, proceeding to fight the Poles for a patch of ground not worth five ducats. A philosophic prince, or indeed any reasonable being of our day, would be struck at such a prospect, by the wicked waste of life and treasure for such a cause. Not so Hamlet. He sees in this encounter an occasion to spur his dull revenge. He even brings the Deity into the debate, and argues that "He that made us with such large discourse, looking before and after," did not intend man to be merely comfortable, but is best pleased when His creatures are sacrificing life and everything desirable on points of honour. Then he proceeds :—

"Now, whether it be

Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on the event,—
A thought, which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom,
And ever three parts coward,—I do not know
Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do,'
Sith I have cause and will and strength and means
To do't. Examples, gross as earth, exhort me :
Witness this army of such mass and charge,
Led by a delicate and tender prince,
Whose spirit, with divine ambition puffed,
Makes mouths at the invisible event :
Exposing what is mortal and unsure
To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,
Even for an egg-shell. Rightly to be great

Is, not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour's at the stake. How stand I then,
That have a father killed, a mother stain'd,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep? While, to my shame, I see
The imminent death of twenty thousand men,
That, for a fantasy and trick of fame,
Go to their graves like beds; fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain. O! from this time forth
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!

In arriving at this conclusion, Hamlet, it is plain, has to overcome, not any aversion to the cruelty of a just vengeance, but the general irresolution and indisposition for a vast and terrible and gross enterprise which, even in rude times, might naturally be created in a gentle nature by culture and habits of metaphysical contemplation. How indifferent to all scruples in matters of just revenge his compeers were, may be judged from the conversation of Laertes and the King. When the son of the slain Polonius says he is ready to cut Hamlet's throat in the church, Claudius cantingly replies: "No place, indeed, should murder sanctuarize;" and casual listeners sometimes fancy he is mildly reprobating the language of Laertes, though not deprecating his design. But these are the words which follow: "Revenge should have no bounds." With Claudius, even when talking moral cant, there is no limitation to the obligation of vengeance which we now call Corsican; and not a character, good, bad,

or indifferent, in the play expresses the faintest doubt of the propriety of retaliation. The shop-boys of a later age stand morally above the level of the Hamlets of half-barbaric eras. The hesitations of such a nature as Hamlet's are unconscious prophetic cerebrations of better times to come—times of order, of law, of mercy, of suppressed personal passions. But it is a mistake in philosophy, as well as in criticism, to see in the purblind motions of Hamlet towards a more advanced moral atmosphere, a clear and conscious aversion to a cruelty which by him, and all the men of his day, was deemed righteous and unexceptionable.* And especially is it a mistake to read thus the performance of an actor who, by restoring and acting very powerfully the most savage scene in which Hamlet appears, shows that he is bent on facing all the seeming incongruities of the character, and means to succeed, not by presenting a sweet and elegant Hamlet of his own, but by a true representation of the much harassed and almost distraught young prince, whom Shakspeare's searching eye saw as he would have been, amidst the trouble and conflict into which he was plunged.

Let us now proceed to notice some of the details by which Irving's conception is wrought out.

* It is remarkable that Shakspeare here continues a previous conception of his in Henry V.—who on the contemplative side of his character bears some comparison with Hamlet—by putting into his mouth reflections on the slaughter of armies which, though much behind the sentiments we now cherish (when we do not wish to make war), are far in advance of the humanity and civilization of any of the other characters in the play.

Without undue anticipation, but with the vividness of a fine picture, the story is to a great extent told at the Lyceum in the very aspect of Hamlet as he enters in the suite of the King and Queen. His face is pale and melancholy. His black hair is tumbled in masses, gracefully, but without any appearance of pre-arrangement. Indeed, it is impossible, at this moment at any rate, to associate with Irving's poetic figure any action that a man might play. He sits while the others stand, not apart, however, in isolation, but in the midst, in semi-distraction. There is no obtrusion of himself. Yet if you unveiled the picture to one who had never seen "Hamlet," he would know that the hero of the play must be this dark-haired, mournfully garbed youth, leaning on his elbow, motionless, unaffectedly sad, making no show of grief, but gazing, it would seem, half pensively, half cynically, not so much into vacancy as into the heart of some oppressing mystery of sorrow. Never was a truer conception more strikingly and simply embodied. Many a classic sonnet, many an academic painting, has won immortality by poetry less true and striking than has been thrown into this simple, unforced attitude, which is as mortal as a young actor's life. When Gertrude the Queen, later in the play,* is invited to believe that other causes have made her Hamlet mad, her instinct prompts the sober reflection :

"I doubt it is no other but the main,
His father's death and our o'er-hasty marriage."

* The passage is not acted.

And this is the one subject of his gloomy thoughts as he sits in the royal presence. He has not yet been tried with thoughts beyond the reaches of his soul. He has only connected, in some vague yet uncertain manner, his two sorrows. A mind always habituated, as some of the unspoken soliloquies show,* to the analysis of character and moral problems, is suddenly jarred by having this favourite pursuit thrust upon him as a necessity of his daily life. It is no longer a hobby or a pastime. It grips him as a duty in the midst of an untempered grief, growing out of it and being part of it. In any case he must have mourned his worshipped father. In any case he must have loathed his uncle. In any case he must have been horrified at his mother's marriage. In any case he must have resented the loss of his placid succession to the throne. In the case as it stands, with a root of suspicion growing rankly in this bitter soil, well may the young dilettante moralist feel as Irving looks. As yet he is dazed with grief and horror. His perplexity has not become frenzied, and is only a part of his melancholy. And so, in negative as well as positive expression, is it written in the actor's expressive face and attitude. We have here the simplest form in which Hamlet is revealed to us by the poet, except in such chance retrospective allusions as tell us what he was in his father's life; and to Irving we owe it that we see how touching, how

* See for example the speech on defects of character—"vicious moles of nature"—in the Fourth Scene of the First Act.

profound in its simplicity, and how natural a basis for subsequent complexities, is the earliest stage of Hamlet's character which Shakspeare dramatically treats.

The dejection of Irving's first speech, absolutely without affectation or whine, or what people call "acting"—and this, be it understood once for all, is a uniform characteristic of the performance throughout—is quite in the key of the picture; and then we pass to the first soliloquy: "Oh! that this too, too solid flesh would melt." In this there are two especial beauties—the heart-broken delivery of the repeated exclamation, "O God!" and Hamlet's attitude against the pillar, as he exclaims: "Heaven and earth! Must I remember?" The concluding line, however, "But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue," seemed to us to be delivered, needlessly and wrongly, without point. While other things are better than point-making, it may be as well for even realistic genius to remember that Shakspeare was an actor, and wrote the pet passages of Hamlet as speeches, which ought to be made effective as such, unless some higher object has to be attained. Upon the entrance of Horatio with Bernardo and Marcellus, it is at once seen that Irving has chosen the right tone for his intercourse with the courtiers. This is of immense importance. There are still those who think it unprincely to be frank and pleasant, and there have even been "critics" who have objected to this Hamlet's bourgeois familiarity. If these

severe judges of manners think that a prince should never unbend, even to those gentlemen "to whom he most adheres," more than a Lombard Street banker does to a dissenting minister, we can only say that that is not our opinion. If they mean to say that Irving's familiarity is vulgar, we can but reply that criticism is to a large extent a matter of testimony, and that "when we saw it," this actor's friendly intimacy with those about him, while entirely devoid both of stiffness and of too evident condescension, was pre-eminently princely. It was especially so, because it rested on a natural consciousness of the deference due to Hamlet's rank, and had in it not a shade of excess on which a too bold companion could presume. It is rather difficult to hit the medium between the beetle-browed "distance" of the ordinary leading tragedian, and the back-slapping, rib-poking sort of familiarity of Mr. Fechter; but Irving, like Edwin Booth, has accomplished the feat to a nicety, to a glance, to a tone, to a gesture, with incalculable benefit to the reality and domestic interest of the play.

In this scene occurs a passage which will always be a subject of difference amongst critics. Mr. Irving has been both praised and blamed for reciting the words—

"Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven
Or ever I had seen that day, Horatio,"

in a pathetic tone. The objectors say the sentiment is a cruel one, and should be uttered in a bitter, angry,

hard-hearted way. The point is not without difficulty, but we incline to the opposite opinion. The remarks we have made above on the mistaken theory, that a conscious aversion to cruelty is the key to Irving's Hamlet, will have shown that we are not likely to be alarmed by an instance of barbarity in his sentiments. Nevertheless, in deciding what is the spirit in which a passage should be delivered, it is often of more importance to remember the dominant tone than to dwell on the details, or even on the ideas of the language. The late Sheridan Knowles was one of the worst, though one of the most confident, of elocutionists, because he would persist in bringing into full blaze every detail of the text. In this case a pathetic tone is probably well chosen, because Hamlet's mind is more possessed by his grief at what has happened than by the horrid significance of the image he uses to express it. That image was, no doubt, a common one in his day, and Hamlet—who, with all his questioning, never questioned the propriety of just and remorseless enmity—adopted it as a customary phrase. His heart was not in the savage figure, but in the utter misery which he used it to portray.

Great discrimination is shown by Irving in the first conversation he holds respecting the ghost. Unless there is a just purpose to be served, he never meets things half way, and in this instance he does not invite the supernatural. When Horatio tells him that he thinks he saw his father yesternight, Hamlet does

not start. He has enough to think of, and cannot quite keep his mind on chit-chat. "Saw! who?" he says, almost casually, barely following the discourse. Then, with a perfect and most artistic truth to nature, he hears the story of the apparition. He has not anticipated it, but the misgivings of his mind and the intensity of his distress have prepared him for anything. "It would have very much amazed him." "Very like, very like." He is ready to be amazed. He foresees that much will follow on the heels of this amazement. *He* will watch to-night, not announcing his resolve in a thunderous voice with the practised *aplomb* of a veteran tragedian, but in tones full of rapt, nervous excitement. "Would the night were come." "Foul deeds will rise." Till 'night, "sit still my soul." Can it be believed that there are critics who complain at this juncture of the play that Hamlet does not spend the time between Scene II. and Scene IV. in changing his pumps for strong boots, lest he should take cold on the platform of the castle while waiting for his father's spirit?

When the spirit appears, and Horatio cries, "Look, my lord, it comes!" the hasty, instinctive actions of Hamlet are as they have been with other actors. Nor do we see why they should be changed. Some people think it highly absurd to throw off hat and cloak at sight of the majestic apparition. They would have thought it much more absurd if Hamlet had addressed his father's spirit, prudently guarding himself the while against sore throat. The same ingenious writers have

objected to the ordinary and sensible usage of the scene, that it is very unpoetical for Horatio and Marcellus to pick up the cap and mantle Hamlet has thrown aside. They would have been the first to complain of the gross unreality involved in leaving the garments on the stage to be visible in the next scene, or to be cleared away by a stage attendant. It is by such baby captiousness as this that the public is compensated for weak appreciation and obtuseness as to what is really new and noticeable.

There is, indeed, one point in which Irving follows some other Hamlets, and in which he and they are clearly wrong. They utter the cry, "Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" all but inaudibly. The intention is to denote by the whisper a state of awe, and it is presumed everybody will know what words are being uttered under the breath; but this should not be taken for granted. Stage whispers should be heard. If the ear misses a familiar line it is sensible of an unpleasant *lacuna*, and of course there are thousands of spectators, and not barren ones either, who do not know what words to expect. A play to be kept true to "the purpose of playing," should be performed on each night as audibly and articulately as if the language had never been heard and would never be printed. The extreme and plaintive beseechingness of Irving's address to the ghost—which is the distinctive novelty of his reading—has been objected to, but is well justified by the situation, and poignantly illustrative of his conception. Hamlet knows little of the sense

of fear, and is not overawed by the supernatural.* Irving's earnest and filial pleading tells us significantly that to him the apparition is the reappearance of the form he has most loved in life, and that, while not unaffected by natural awe, his being is all but monopolised by the yearning desire to know and, if possible, assuage the grief by which his father's last sleep has been disturbed.

The manner in which, when father and son are alone, Irving receives the spirit's communication, has in it too much of surprise, especially at the word "Murder," but after this the scene is a succession of brilliant hits. The speech, "Hold! hold, my heart," usually mechanical and, as it proceeds, not too intelligible, is lit up wonderfully by the first display of that tendency of Hamlet to indulged frenzy and exaltation which Irving has been, as we have already asserted, the first to represent with fidelity to nature. In the speech there occur some words which, to previous Hamlets, have proved such a *crux* as to tempt one to charge Shakspeare with a childish mistake in giving them to a grown man to utter. After apostrophising his uncle thus: "O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain," he exclaims—

"My tables—meet it is I set it down,

That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain."

Who has not felt the absurdity of the action as

* It has been complained that Irving does not look so frightened as a man would who saw a ghost; but this is in reality a fine and true touch of character. To Hamlet this is not a ghost, but *the* ghost.

they have seen Hamlet after Hamlet, with grand deliberation and careful pose, inscribe this commonplace in a memorandum book? Does Irving discard the tablets? By no means. But he makes the use of them life-like and probable. His snatching them from his pocket, and writing on them, is the climax of an outburst hardly distinguishable from hysteria. Hamlet is evidently one of those who, though capable of any amount of acting and reticence in company, finds in solitude a license and a cue for excitement, and who, when alone and under the influence of strong feelings, will abandon themselves to their fancies. Such men—though sane enough in society—will pace rooms like wild animals, will gaze into looking-glasses until they are frightened at the expression of their own eyes, will talk aloud, will write and tear into fragments many pages, will do almost anything to find vent for emotions which their imagination is powerful enough to kindle, but not fertile or methodical enough to satisfy. All this we are reminded of by Irving's startling hysterical burst at this passage—so awkward hitherto, and destined to be awkward yet with actors of temperaments less highly strung. Thus, we can imagine, has Hamlet ere now ranted and scribbled, as Disraeli's Contarini Fleming rants and scribbles his raptures to some Egeria of his boyish fancy. Thus has he uttered aloud with ecstatic intonations, and written a thousand times when by himself, the name of his most beautified Ophelia. And thus of late has he often tried, o'er and o'er in his

imagination, the occulted guilt, whether great or small, unnatural murder, or mere heartless bad taste, of his mother and her second spouse. Minds of this turn ordinarily expect nothing unusual. They revel thus in giving voice and form to their fancies, precisely because they find the emotional experiences and opportunities of fact so few and transient. But when Hamlet has, as it were, been made free of the spirit world—when he has obtained from his dead father's own ghostly accents, horrible, most horrible corroboration of his own frenzied reveries—what wonder that a wild fit of exaltation should ensue, and that, while it lasts, and before self-control returns with the arrival of Horatio and Marcellus, he should fall into extravagances of which, in sober moments, any reasonable being might be ashamed?

And note how, even when the restraint of his companions' presence is on him, the remaining influence of his recent hysterical frenzy affects the course of his action. As an instance of thoughtful, subtle art, it is worth noticing how gradually the high tide of this excitement ebbs. It does not at once retreat and leave the beach of fact and daily life all dry and practicable. Now and then a strong wave of the subsiding half-lunacy astonishes the prince's startled attendants. But the flood retires, and retires, until the point is reached when, melting into sheer craving for human fellowship, Hamlet takes his two companions arm in arm,* and, with pensively bowed

* This action was we believe first introduced by Macready.

head and softened accents, leads them away uttering the simple last words, "Let's go together."

What is more important is, that the condition which Hamlet is in, when the ghost has gone, up to the moment of the entrance of his fellow-student and the soldier in pursuit of him, lends itself to, and probably suggests, the purpose which he swiftly forms of veiling the enterprise on which he has now to enter beneath a show of eccentricity and mental disturbance. He has actually been till this very instant in the border-land between sanity and madness, a border-land from which those who frequent it seldom pass into insanity, but in which they yield to impulses such as might easily suggest to Hamlet the facile expedient of putting on an antic disposition. The design is conceived with amazing rapidity and with so little effort, that Shakspeare does not even hint it, either in soliloquy or dialogue, until Hamlet has been for some minutes trying his hand at executing it; but once formed it finds ready opportunities in his mood and the chopping sea of his tossing and tumultuous thoughts. The unwholesome sportiveness of Irving, as he tries untimely jests upon his inquisitive friends, is even more uncanny than the other form his hysteria has taken in solitude. In the impossibility of discriminating how much of his jocosity is mere spasmodic revulsion, and how much is artful experiment, we see much deeper than heretofore into the nature of Hamlet's lunacy. When he said he was but mad north-north-west, he was not

merely laughing in his sleeve at those whom he was perplexing. He knew how near he often was in moments of high excitement to the confines of sanity, and how in this tendency he found facilities for making other people think him just as mad as he pleased. As for Horatio and Marcellus, the first to be played upon, they may well think the young prince distraught. They have followed the ghost and him into the wild and forlorn seclusion, hemmed in by flood and cliff, in which the mysterious impartment has been made. Their own excitement and anxiety is intense. They find Hamlet suddenly possessed with all the symptoms of wild derangement. The cunning of his subsequent conversation can hardly reassure them. As with an unprecedentedly natural action * he warns them not to seem hereafter to know his secret, they are still baffled by his restraint of speech, and when he leads them kindly away, they must quit the scene with feelings strangely compounded of curiosity, awe, and solicitude. One takes pleasure in recalling that Marcellus appears to have sacredly kept his oath, while Horatio became a close sharer of Hamlet's secrets, and soon learnt to know how much, and at the same time how little, reality there was in his friend's apparent unsoundness of mind. It is the new life thrown into this key-

* At the words, "With arms encumbered thus," it is usual for Hamlets to fold their arms and look mysterious. Irving takes the arm of one of his companions, as he supposes they may take each others' hereafter, and assumes a confidential air, as if the two were comparing their past recollections.

scene of the tragedy by Irving's grasp of Hamlet's nervous and susceptible idiosyncrasy that thus interests us in the minor characters of the story, and clears up for us, with a bright prevision, much in its later stages that has long puzzled critics and psychologists.

At the beginning of the Second Act the Lyceum version retains, almost in its integrity, a conversation between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, which is usually more cut down. As yet it is not familiar enough to be appreciated by the many, who enjoy some of Shakspeare's more crabbed passages from use and wont; but it is effective as an example of Hamlet's antic disposition on its intellectual side; and Irving's delivery of it, as of all the dialogue, is perfect in spirit, in accentuation, and in play of social tone. Amongst many other nice points there is a fine subacid expression thrown into the words, "if philosophy could find it out," as if Hamlet were laughing half at himself and half at his hearers for discussing, as a subject of grave criticism, the gross flunkeyism of the court towards his uncle, the newly crowned supplanter. On the other hand, Irving seemed to overcharge the meaning of the simple phrase, "who shall 'scape whipping?" in the admonition to Polonius to treat every man better than he deserves. No covert signification is likely to have been here intended. These, however, are small points. A very fine and thoughtful rendering of the long soliloquy, "Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I," is none

the less fine for being somewhat peevish in tone; and it concludes with a flash of ingenuity which is already widely famous. During the actor's recitation, Hamlet has been observed to be revolving something in his mind. Then he has asked the actor to study and insert in the "murder of Gonzago," a speech which he will prepare. And now, in the "rogue and peasant slave" soliloquy, he has descanted on the plan by which he means to tent his uncle to the quick, and to obtain grounds of action more relative than the ghost's revelation. A silly practice has prevailed amongst Hamlets of uttering the concluding words—

"The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."

as if the idea had just struck them. Irving makes them partly the culmination of a line of thought, and partly the natural accompaniment of a most striking action. With an exuberance exactly corresponding in another groove of feeling with the quasi-hysterical use of his tablets in the first act, he rushes to a pillar and, placing his note-book against it begins, as the act-drop descends, to scribble hints for the speech he means to write. This bold innovation is purely inventive. Irving himself would not pretend that it is suggested by or necessary to the text. That it has been received with unanimous approbation proves how well it is done. That upon mature examination it must still be applauded as a safe and brilliant illustration of character, where the actor has the art and the temperament

required to do it effectively, proves how true was the insight which guided the new Hamlet in the great scene after the ghost's revelation to the fruitful and never-misleading idea of an idiosyncrasy which in solitude is singularly exuberant and ecstatic. "Now I am alone"—exclaims Hamlet in the Second Act; and the freedom, the simplicity, the abandonment, the expansiveness, the almost unhinged and yet consistently ordered excitement of his solitude—these are the phenomena, freshly seen and truly scanned, upon which Irving has founded the interpretation he has developed.

Afterwards, when Hamlet, by the contrivance of Polonius, meets Ophelia, we learn, in the scene in which Irving rises highest perhaps in tragic grandeur, that there are circumstances which may bring out, even when he is not alone, the strange ecstasy in which it is Hamlet's nature, as this fine actor reads it, to expatiate. When he begins to talk to Ophelia he is on his guard. Other business than love-making is in his thoughts. An instinct warns him to shun the distractions and wooings of the passion. Yet the fair Ophelia is before him, and the love of forty thousand brothers is in his heart. He has no shield, no disguise, but his "antic disposition"; and he puts it on. The rule with modern Hamlets is to pretend to be mad later, when they have perceived behind the arras the King and Polonius, lawful but despicable espials. This is not Irving's idea. It is in the coolness of the opening conversation that he affects the

forgetfulness, the eccentricity, the insensibility of derangement. His love peeps forth sadly, in a melancholy line or accent, here and there, but the general tone of his talk to the poor jilted Ophelia is mere baffling unaccountableness. The excitement, however, as it mounts, is evidently too much for him. The two strongest feelings he has ever had are at odds which shall be master. He is as self-watching by habit as he is impulsive in the passionate processes of his affections. He is accustomed, and knows he is accustomed, to yield himself up to overwhelming feelings. He now finds himself between two. He remembers well the irresistible tumult into which the sight of Ophelia used to throw him. He is puzzled by a sort of paralysis of the affection which he well knows still holds lordship in his bosom.* He loves Ophelia; and with the old love; but not with the old tempestuousness. A stronger power has curbed and bitted his hitherto untameable passion. A vocation has been thrust upon him, which fully tasks his powers, and will probably expel for ever from his heart the capacity for domestic pleasure. As he hastily pierces here and there, with strong yet futile glances, the thick-gathering darkness of his situation,

* The effect of this obvious element of Hamlet's excitement would be even greater in the Lyceum representation but for the unfortunate, though perhaps inevitable, suppression of the pathetic recital by Ophelia, in the First Scene of the Second Act, of Hamlet's visit to her, sometimes interpreted as a part of his "shamming," but in fact denoting a crisis in the internal conflict between his old love and his new duty.

the time, though only a few moments, seems to those who watch Irving with understanding eyes, to cover an indefinite period of anxious and exciting thought. What can young Hamlet do, with the "prettiness" of his life thus turned into an *inferno*, and with neither time to think, nor chance of thinking to any purpose? There is nothing for it but wild and whirling words, and these he utters amidst many strange, fitful glarings, and many a suffering pressure of the hand to his throbbing head. What is beauty? A temptress. What is Ophelia's honesty? A mere fleeting virtue, that can neither live nor inoculate her natural depravity. He did love her once—this in a momentary interval of melancholy sincerity—but she should not have believed him. Why should she be a breeder of sinners? For himself, though indifferent honest, he could accuse himself of such things, that it were better his mother had not borne him. What should such fellows as he—arrant knaves all—do crawling between earth and heaven? Then, suddenly he sees Polonius and the King, and the climax comes. But not as hitherto usual, in the shape of pretended madness. Rather does his lunacy become all but real and pronounced. To all his other griefs, as if they were not enough, is added environment by spies. Nothing could so agonisingly cut to the inmost sense of one already almost distracted by agony. For a moment he is stern in self-defence. Her father is at home. Let the doors be shut upon him that he may play the fool only there. But these are the

last words he can say with any degree of sanity. His first sudden "farewell," is a frantic ebullition of all-encompassing, all-racking pain. What was till now histrionic, passes, as the histrionic phase of highly strung natures easily does, into real frenzy. His words come faster and wilder. His eyes flash with a more sinister lightning as he gives Ophelia the plague of inevitable calumny for her dowry. Again "farewell;" and now he rushes forth, but only to return laden, as it were, with a new armful of hastily gathered missiles of contumely. He is getting now to the very leavings of his mind. He has nothing to hurl at his love but the common-places of men against women. They paint, they jig, they amble, they lisp, and make their wantonness their ignorance. There shall be no more of it—and one almost feels that so furious and fiery a reformer may prevent it by flinging sheer terror about him, like brands from a conflagration. There shall be no more marriages. It hath made him mad, he says; and it is almost true. He flies—as if his head and feet were winged like Mercury's—his now for ever discarded love. A flash of frenzy, and he has quitted the scene. He leaves behind him the fair maiden who has ere now sucked the honey of his music vows, bemoaning her destiny, to have seen what she has seen, see what she sees. The audience, which this episode leaves petrified with a strange and seldom experienced feeling of exhaustion from pent excitement, may well show after a moment's pause, by rare demonstrations of enthusiasm, its vivid

comprehension of a feat of psychological acting which has hardly been paralleled in living memory. Forty lines or so of print contain the whole of the text, but in the acting there is a whole volume of power.

Now observe once more how truly and purely Irving's power has been drawn from those springs of character which his original insight divined and discovered at the outset of the play. Bear in mind the youth, the eloquence, and the impressibleness of Hamlet; his natural tendency to excited self-communing, easily passing into the affectation of madness, and sometimes barely distinguishable from it; and the degree to which he must naturally be affected by the cruel and perplexing accumulation of griefs and annoyances in the interview with Ophelia. It is from deep contemplation of all this that Irving has drawn the grandeur of the scene. How different it is from all that we have been accustomed to! Shall we ever again bear with the wigged, elderly gentleman, who skips alertly on to the stage, and exclaims with well-primed ferocity, "I have heard of your paintings too!" Of course he has. Any time these forty years. Too often to talk about them now, even in frenzy. Experience is in his stride, in his rhythm, in his methodical wavings of his hands. He would be *blasé*, but that he must play his part with the due and business-like amount of energy which is required by precedent. Irving's prince is young—essentially young—not merely in the matter of his own actual years, but in spirit. To this Hamlet belongs perpetual youth. He

is of the temperament that will see a play at fifty as eagerly, and hear a speech as readily, as at twenty. Above all, his love of woman, his interest in her, his chivalry about her, his knowledge (like Will Honeycomb's) that we can only know she is not to be known, is of the kind which in some men never burns out, nor is snuffed out, nor flickers into noisome knowingness. It is this mood, in the form it takes on the threshold of manhood, that supplies Hamlet with the slights he hurls upon Ophelia; and this mood—the mood of perennial simplicity, brightness, excitableness, and juvenility*—Irving's genius has unerringly singled out as that which Shakspeare meant to exhibit, acted upon by the exceptional circumstances of the weird tragedy of Elsinore.

* The critic of the *Spectator*, with a piquant mixture of perception and perversity, has complained that Irving recites the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, as if it were one of Bulwer's bits of pseudo-philosophic rhetoric, meant to attract by its eloquent mannerism. We are heretical enough to think that Shakspeare meant it to be Bulwerian and knew it was Bulwerian, and that its charm, though certainly not in its mannerism, does lie in its perfect form rather than in its hackneyed substance. In fact, Shakspeare never forgot what few critics seem able to realise, that Hamlet was not an experienced moral philosopher, but a very eloquent and precocious young man, whom it is most interesting to follow through the perplexities and agonies of an unexampled moral struggle. Such a young man, when in repose, would be sure to indulge in Bulwerian reveries, and those reveries had the vast advantage of being composed by Shakspeare. When under strong excitement, he ran into tragic wildnesses too grand for any Bulwer to have conceived; but he remains throughout as juvenile and freshly susceptible as the most Bulwerian of Lord Lytton's heroes.

The scene with Ophelia lay in the route of our disquisition on Irving's conception of Hamlet's temperament, and we therefore gave it precedence, but we must not forget that it is immediately preceded by the most celebrated and most rhetorical of Hamlet's soliloquies.

In analysing a performance, whose distinctive merit lies in an original and true conception, it is on the scenes most salient in the exhibition of character that space and observation must be principally spent. In other scenes we can only demand consistency with the strong conception distinctly marked (to use a musical expression) in bars which contain the signature of the key, and that high level of histrionic efficiency, without which it would be an impertinence for even the most original thinker to obtrude his ideas of a great character upon the public. The first of these merits—which if not the more important is the more essentially characteristic of the actor—must be allowed to Irving by everybody who can distinguish one notion of Hamlet from another. The merit of adequacy in histrionic detail may, perhaps, be by some less readily conceded; but to follow Hamlet from speech to speech, vindicating his representative line by line, is impossible. We shall only, therefore, repeat that mannerisms ought not to be too severely proscribed, since they have had to be tolerated in nearly all great actors, and suggest that, if any of the fine speeches of Hamlet are less effective than they have been in more artificial impersonations, the sacrifice of some

elocutionary beauties is also part of the price that has to be paid for fresh and sensitive dramatic fidelity. Most frankly do we admit that "To be, or not to be," spoken in various casual attitudes, with natural up-risings and down-sittings, just as Hamlet would have thought it, and with the idea running through the recitation that such is the usual stuff of Hamlet's reflections, is not so telling as its delivery in front of the stage by a polished reciter with a deep melodious voice who, though it is true he has other business to do, has nothing on his mind for the time but to make this exquisite speech delightfully impressive. The fact is that such speeches are amongst the many conventions of art, and perhaps they ought to be treated as such. It may be as little in character to utter them in ultra-natural attitudes, and with realistic avoidance of point-making, as it would be to decline to utter them at all, on the ground that in real life people do not talk to themselves. These recitations are in a play what the solos are in an opera. It would be a dangerous experiment for Elvino to sing "*Tutto è sciolto*" sitting on a stile, or shifting from seat to seat in his cottage, however natural such attitudes might be; and it is not less daring for Irving to deliver the Hamlet speeches as he delivers them, while the musical voices of well-graced tragic soloists are ready to win from him, by a few lines of balanced declamation, the wreath which is fairly his by virtue of a superior conception and more inspired study. To what extent an artist with a noble and original

theory of a grand part should concede to popular taste, it is difficult to say; but the essentially rhetorical character of Shakspeare's great speeches, and the traditions of majesty and melody which cling to them, seem to suggest that a great actor may, without undue condescension from his ideal, do his utmost to conciliate his reading of the character he plays with the reading of these show-pieces in the manner experience has shown to be most effective with the million. A little study with this canon in view, instead of the desire, very fit in other passages, to be absolutely real and consistent, would, we believe, enable so fine a master of his art as Irving to approach nearer the popular ideal, without sacrificing many shades of the character he is bent on preserving. And he may be encouraged to the effort by reflecting that the great show-speeches of Hamlet have passed into immortal popularity, as we have already hinted in a note, not through their profundity, but because of the exquisite forms in which their skilfully elaborated imagery and diction have embodied the most familiar puzzles of human meditation. As given on the first night by Irving, these soliloquies were conceived with so little attention to their essentially declamatory traditions, that he did not even study to end them with the usual perorative inflections, which give a distinct and satisfying sense of something concluded to the ear. This seems to be carrying purism of reality and character farther than is warranted by the structure and tone of Shakspeare's work; and with an actor of

less power and slower instincts, it might have injured the general effect of the performance. For, be it remembered, it would never do to play "Much Ado about Nothing" in the style of Robertson's "Ours."

In all other respects than that of declamatory form, Irving's soliloquies are full of beauties, to enumerate which would be a very tedious form of homage. And, indeed, having made clear our idea of the conception upon which he has worked, it will now be easy to indicate with brevity the most conspicuous remaining instances in which in detail he has individualised his performance.

One of these is the advice to the players, the pleasantness, grace, and point of which produce a thrill of satisfaction, such as only attends the very finest high comedy. Most Hamlets in this speech are saved by the words; Irving helps the words; and for once it is possible to say that there is not a passage in the play in which Hamlet runs counter to his own directions. Similarly graceful is Irving's conduct during the quiet parts of the play-scene. The key of it is in the remark made to Horatio before it begins—"I must be idle." Irving is idle. Before the spectators enter, his demeanour is not subtle and contriving, but anxious, and his looks are haggard. He has set more than his life upon the cast. But when the King and Queen and courtiers enter, he becomes gay and *insouciant*. Ophelia's fan, with which he plays, is of peacocks' feathers, and as he lies at her feet, patting his breast with it, at the

words, "Your majesty, and we that have free souls," the feathers themselves are not lighter than his spirits seem. In his double-meaning replies to the King there is none of that malignant significance with which it is the custom for Hamlets to discount the coming victory. His "no offence i' the world" is said drily, and that is all. His watching of the King is not conspicuous. He does not crawl prematurely towards him, or seize his robe. Even up to the crisis, though his excitement rises, his spirits bear him almost sportively through. But when once the King and Queen start from their chairs, Hamlet springs from the ground, darts with a shrill scream to the seats from which they vanished like ghosts, flings himself—a happy thought—into the chair which the King has vacated, his body swaying the while from side to side in irrepressible excitement, and recites there—though the roar of applause into which the audience is surprised renders it barely audible—the well-known stanza, "Why, let the stricken deer go limp." A still greater, because wild and bizarre, effect follows as Hamlet leaves the chair, and in a sort of jaunty nonsense rhythm chants the seldom-used lines,

"For thou dost know, O Damon dear,
This realm dismantled was
Of Jove himself ; and now reigns here
A very very—peacock."

At the last word, said suddenly after a pause, he looks at Ophelia's fan, which he has kept till now, and throws it away, as if it had suggested a word

and was done with. There is infinite significance in the apparent inconsequence of this last boyish burst, and it is very suggestive of the force and truth of Irving's conception, that the audience receive it with as much enthusiasm as if it were a perfectly logical and intelligible climax. The doggrel has only the faintest if any connection with the event, but it is evidently introduced by Shakspeare, as another example of Hamlet's constitutional exuberance, and upon this Irving has worked. So vivid a rendering of the play-scene lives not in our recollection, and we cannot allow that it is rendered less effective by the extempore character of the arrangements made for representing the little drama. These are very natural, and such as might be expected in an old pillared palace, used for domestic as well as state purposes. They therefore greatly strengthen the effect of the situation. In this, as in other respects, the manager of the theatre has exercised a wise discretion, and proved himself the possessor of a chastened judgment.

In the earlier passages of it, the play-scene is made deeply interesting by some touches of fruitful artistic instinct on the part of Miss Isabella Bateman, who plays Ophelia. Of this character, as a rule, little can be said. It is all favour and prettiness—all poetry, picturesqueness, and pathos—and all that can usually be recorded is, that the actress who plays it preserves these qualities. Yet there are opportunities in it, as Miss Bateman shows us, which, slight as they are, may greatly heighten the general interest of the story. It

is a good rule in acting to remember, without disturbing the *ensemble*, that to each individual human creature, except under the stress of strong feelings, the most important and engrossing thing in the world is himself or herself. Now, a marked beauty of Miss Bateman's Ophelia is, that though she knows Polonius's fair daughter, so easily won and thrown away, must be of small consideration in the story of a prince's life most tragically disturbed, she carefully preserves in the critical moment of the play-scene Ophelia's identity, and indicates the sensibility which must under her circumstances have been acutely touched. It is in conformity with this true reading that in the play-scene, instead of exhibiting that airy and chittish indifference, which even good Ophelias are apt to show, she is obviously in low spirits, and ill disposed for Hamlet's banter. When Hamlet calls her "metal more attractive," her response, "You are merry, my lord," has a touch of mournful pique in it, as if Ophelia meant to remind him that it was easy for him to break poor girls' hearts and go his way laughing, and as if also she was sincerely sorry to see in his merriment, following so speedily on his recent alarming display of passion, new evidence of the wreck of his mind. Her other few slight words have the same effect, though the language does not permit it to be so marked; and the result, in making the scene natural and life-like, is much greater than could be expected from so slight a cause. In all the usual points of Ophelia, Miss Bateman is graceful and effectually pathetic, while in

this particular she illustrates how much may be done, even in the smallest incidents, by original thought concentrated upon them, in the desire to be faithful to the whole truth of what has to be represented.

We pass to the scene between Hamlet and his mother. The celebrated opening of this—the murder of Polonius—is not amongst Irving's strongest episodes. For some reason not easy to assign, he does not give the usual force to the question, "Is it the King?" in which Charles Kean was, and Sullivan is, great. The idea that Hamlet is startled into the most vehement excitement by the thought that he has done upon hazard the deed for which he has been trying to nerve and prepare himself, does not appear to have been so overpoweringly present to the new Hamlet as to his predecessors. All the rest of the scene is very fine. Hamlet's beseeching of his mother—to whom, be it remembered, he has come in mercy, not in judgment—is affecting beyond measure. His dispensing with the miniatures, in contrasting the two brothers, raises to a greater height of poetry language which has hitherto been lowered by these said pictures towards prose. And, above everything else poignant and impressive is the earnestness with which Hamlet kneels and casts his head upon his mother's lap, at the adjuration to her not to escape the reproaches of her conscience by attributing to him madness. Here, with a mother to save from sin and destruction, there is nothing left of the son's antic disposition; but the deep, the tearful, sus-

ceptibility which lies so near the base of his character, remains. Understood in the full significance of the relations between Hamlet and Gertrude, which Irving helps us to perceive by throwing aside all the accustomed stilted magnificence of the "leading tragedian," the spectacle is most memorable. A son kneeling where he said his first prayers, to implore the mother who taught him to lisp them to forsake her sin, is an incident worthy of the greatest poet, and only to be fitly enacted by the greatest of tragic actors. As the act drop descends, Hamlet is seen dragging the body of Polonius from behind the arras, and this has been objected to. But the spirit of Shakspeare is not in those who could find fault with it. He never glossed or blinked the horrors of tragedy. He could invest the motives of murder with the loftiest poetry, and yet leave plainly written on his pages, that where there is homicide there must be disgusting incidents, and that even the most poetical beings cannot fall into courses of criminal violence without consequences sordidly and repulsively horrible.

Our task is now almost at an end. Hamlet having brought his mission of revenge to an ineffectual crisis, as so young and frank and tardy an avenger was pretty sure to do, is sent abroad, and in the Fourth Act at the Lyceum there is little of interest except Miss Bateman's performance of Ophelia's flower-bedecked lunacy. Her inconsequence when distraught is as touching as her reproachfulness when sane. In the

Fifth Act Hamlet returns. Irving's performance of the churchyard scene has fitness, vigour, and genuine poetry, but no novelty—nothing noticeable, indeed, except subtle indications of the restraint which is placed on Hamlet when he is *not* alone by a quick sense of the ridiculous. But when we pass from this to the last scene, the whole spirit of the play is made new by his originality. Instead of producing the impression of a duly arranged shambles, usually conveyed by the moodiness and solemnity of all concerned in the fencing bout except Osric, the scene, as here played, gives one the feeling of a real trial of skill. For a wager Hamlet has for the nonce cast his nighted colour off, and is ready for sport. It is the breathing-time of day with him, and he has no *arrière pensée*. He is sorry, heartily, for having injured Laertes, and makes amends like a true gentleman. He fences like one also, with delightful ease and brilliancy. Between the hits he talks merrily and self-complacently with his backers. All his troubles have not extinguished in him his liking for ribands in the cap of his youth. Probably he has begun to see that in great undertakings chance or Providence has more to say than we have. At any rate he is free for the time. Trouble will come soon enough. He is happier than he has seemed since he threw away Ophelia's fan. He means the King to win his wager, and will not heed the odd hits.

In fact, for anything that appears in this portion of the scene, the fencing match might be a mere

lightsome parenthesis in the tragedy, not tending in any way to its catastrophe. But the mountebank's unction is to change all this. "No cataplasm so rare, collected from all simples that have virtue under the moon," can save an hour longer the long-forfeited life of Claudius. On a sudden the fencers are incensed. They change foils in a brilliantly contrived pass. They mutually inflict fatal wounds. Then the truth gushes forth from the lips as the life-blood from the side of Laertes. Hamlet's misgiving, "such as might trouble a woman," has come true. There is a Providence in the bating of a foil as in the fall of a sparrow. In Hamlet there is not half an hour's life. But a moment will suffice. The envenomed point might be dispensed with, so savage is the prince's onslaught on his adulterous uncle. Hamlet seizes the King by the collar of his royal robe as he might an intrusive scullion—runs him through as he holds him—flings him down backwards to the earth like carrion. The vengeance has come at last, from his hands and by his will, but not by his contrivance. There is no triumph in his victory. He has to die, and he yearns but to clear himself to those who look pale and trembling at this chance. He compels Horatio to live and do him justice. Then peacefully he expires, reaching his right hand upward to the heaven he hopes for, and then falling back in silence upon the earth—that "sterile promontory" where the best year of his life has been made unutterably unhappy.

So dies Hamlet—but lives immortal; henceforth more than ever a pathetic ideal of refined humanity, torn and wrecked upon cruel and coarse troubles; of young philosophy; of peering irresolution; of awed yet venturesome imagination; of wayward trickiness; of religion faintly clouded with doubt, yet clear in tenderness of conscience and purity of sweet counsel; of love, domestic and sexual, embittered and shattered; of a heart riven by the sorrow most trying to it; of powers coping with problems horrible either to be mastered by or to master; of thoughts teeming with imagery and conjecture, on which the world never tires of meditating; of a fate, fitfully shunned, recklessly challenged, and at last encountered by mere chance medley; of many other things, also, which even Shakspeare can barely express, and about which lesser men can only wrangle.

To present this matchless figure worthily and vividly to the men of his time has been the highest ambition of every great actor, and that ambition Henry Irving has abundantly attained. To prove it, we have dwelt not on his general philosophical sublimity or tragic grandeur, in which he could but rank with noble predecessors, but on the features of Hamlet's being he has especially revealed and illuminated. In this character a thousand undying beauties and significances of art have been piously cherished from age to age. To Irving belongs the merit of snatching—with a hand feverish, perhaps, but sure—graces which were

not, and can hardly become, in a stage sense, traditional. He has made Hamlet much more, and something more ethereal, than a type of feeble doubt, of tragic struggle, or even of fine philosophy. The immortality of his Hamlet is immortal youth, immortal enthusiasm, immortal tenderness, immortal nature.

